

Statement of
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President, Board of Families of Flight 93, Inc.

On behalf of
Families of Flight 93, Inc.

Before the
U. S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency
Management

Hearing on Permanent Flight 93 Memorial in U.S. Capitol
July 26, 2005

Chairman Shuster:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your invitation to appear today to discuss the importance of a permanent memorial in the U.S. Capitol and your important sponsorship of this Resolution. I'd also like to thank Ranking Member Norton (D-DC), and the other Members of the Committee for inviting us to testify today. It is a privilege and an honor to speak before you regarding your proposed memorial to Flight 93.

My name is D. Hamilton Peterson, and my father, Donald A. Peterson, and my stepmother, Jean H. Peterson, both perished aboard Flight 93. I am President of Families of Flight 93, a 501(c)(3) non-profit Board incorporated under Pennsylvania law comprised of family members who lost relatives on Flight 93. Our group, in conjunction with a Federal Advisory Commission, the National Park Service, and the National Park Foundation, is working to build a memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, honoring the

passengers and crew of Flight 93. On behalf of the Families of Flight 93, I am grateful for this opportunity to present our views concerning the permanent U.S. Capitol Memorial.

Also present and testifying with me today in support of this honorable resolution is my fellow Board member and also a Flight 93 Federal Advisory Commissioner, Ken Nacke, who lost his brother aboard Flight 93. Unable to attend today is Board member Patrick White, of Naples, Florida, our Board Government Affairs liaison, who has been working closely with many of you on securing our efforts on the Shanksville crash site memorial.

It is with extreme enthusiasm and heartfelt appreciation that Mr. White, Mr. Nacke and I report back to you that without objection our Family Board endorses your Resolution to memorialize Flight 93 in the Capitol.

The 9/11 Commission aptly titled the section of its report describing Flight 93 as “The Battle for United 93.” These simple words alone provide enormous insight into what happened on that plane on the morning of September 11th, as heroic passengers and crew, aided by information provided to them by friends and family, began their struggle to prevent their flight from becoming another missile of death and destruction. The four hijackers had armed themselves with knives and claimed to have a bomb; the passengers and crew were armed only with their ability to believe the unbelievable news they heard

via phone calls with those on the ground, and with their determination to engage their hijackers in a battle of historic proportions.

Of course the exact details of the battle for United 93 may never be fully known. What we do know is that those aboard the plane mounted a heroic effort to fight back and thwart the hijackers. Information pieced together from phone conversations, the cockpit voice recorder, and radio transmissions from Flight 93 reveal that the passengers and crew had devised a plan to revolt against the hijackers and began that revolt shortly before 10:00 a.m.

Based on information passengers and crew provided to friends and family, it is believed that at least two people had been stabbed and lay either dead or injured on the cabin floor. Many who have listened to the cockpit voice recorder, including myself, also surmise that a female flight attendant, who may have been held hostage in the cockpit, fought back against the hijackers and was subsequently murdered. As the plane raced towards Washington, the passengers and crew raced towards the cockpit and began their courageous battle. The cockpit voice recorder contains heart-wrenching sounds of their efforts to break through the cockpit door. Voices of passengers and crew, while muffled and difficult to identify, could be discerned, as could the sounds of breaking glasses and plates. In my mind, as I listened to the cockpit voice recorder, I could see those brave individuals using the food service cart as a battering ram, trying with all their might to break through the door. At least one passenger was a pilot, another had training as an air

traffic controller. Had the cockpit been retaken, it is entirely possible that these passengers could have brought Flight 93 to safety.

The hijackers were of course aware of the revolt taking place in the cabin. The valiant efforts of the passengers and crew to enter the cockpit were answered almost immediately by the hijacker piloting the plane. Ziad Jarrah started to roll the plane violently to the left and right, obviously attempting to frustrate the mounting counterattack by throwing the passengers and crew off balance. Another aircraft in the skies above Pennsylvania that morning reported seeing Flight 93 “waving his wings.” Several people on the ground who witnessed Flight 93 in its last minutes in the sky later commented on seeing the plane dip its wings sharply to the left then right. In spite of these attempts to thwart them, the passengers and crew continued their fight – they never gave up. The cockpit voice recorder continued as well, recording the sounds of their persistent assault on the cockpit right up until the end, when the plane crashed into an empty field at 580 miles per hour. At the time that it crashed, Flight 93 was only 20 minutes flying time from where we sit today. Had the plane reached its destination, which we surmise was the Capitol building, it would have crashed here at 10:30, when the Capitol would have been teeming with people.

Information gleaned from interviews of conspirators to the 9/11 attacks, as well as from Zacarias Moussaoui’s recent guilty plea, indeed indicates that the hijackers most likely intended to fly Flight 93 into our Capitol building. The hijackers were no doubt aware of the success of their confederates earlier that morning and were intent on

carrying out their mission as well. The 9/11 plan, apparently years in the making, was being successfully played out. The passengers and crew of Flight 93, however, had a different plan. Against all odds, they banded together to foil four armed terrorists. Of course theirs was a qualified success – the passengers and crew saved countless lives here in Washington, but lost their own. Al Qaeda had been handed its first defeat by a small group of unarmed individuals – all regular people the morning they boarded the plane and all remarkable heroes.

It is against this backdrop that we sit here today and ask whether a memorial in the Capitol building is appropriate. After all, memorials in our Capitol must be special – to have them at every turn for everything and anything would no doubt dilute their intended effect – to give people pause to remember a person or event that made a significant difference in the history of our country. With all we now know about what happened on Flight 93, there can be no doubt that a permanent memorial in the Capitol is both appropriate and indeed necessary, as is the memorial being planned for the crash site in Shanksville. How many people, working here, or visiting in the Capitol, would not be here today had the passengers and crew of that plane chosen to remain passive? The tolls of death and destruction at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are grim reminders of what could have been in this very spot.

My two sons were 5 ½ and 1 ½ on September 11, 2001. The older was well aware of what happened that day and how it affected our nation. Many young Americans, of course, were not directly impacted by the events and know little of the bravery exhibited that day by countless people -- firefighters, office workers, airplane passengers, police. This memorial to Flight 93 would be a permanent reminder of the power of a handful of good people. In this age when evildoers get most of the news coverage, how important it is to have a tribute to those who faced evil with courage and conviction, and refused to give up.

In closing, I am often asked why it is so important that we honor and memorialize the actions of those aboard Flight 93. My constant refrain is: Ask yourself what message would have been sent to the world had the terrorists prevailed in destroying one of the greatest icons of democracy and of the free world – the U.S. Capitol and all it represents. Instead of a complete victory of evil over good, on that dark day a beautiful ray of hope emerged -- a message of hope and survival, and ultimate triumph.

Not three months later in December of 2001, that positive message inspired passengers and crew aboard a transatlantic flight to thwart Richard Reid in his attempt to detonate a shoe bomb powerful enough to have penetrated the fuselage of the plane flying from Paris to Miami. Indeed, every day across the world as passengers and crew board flights, there is an implicit understanding that people are ready to take action to prevent terrorists from stealing our freedom and our lives. Flight 93's eternal gift is the knowledge that good people can and must prevail.

On my own behalf, and on behalf of the Families of Flight 93, I thank you Mr. Shuster, Mr. Murtha, members of this Committee, as well as Senators Santorum and Conrad, for your efforts to memorialize the sacrifice and bravery of our family members.

Hamilton Peterson

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